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AUTHOR Hughes, Anne
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effects of nursery school assessment policy on collaboration among staff from different professional backgrounds and between staff and parents. The paper highlights this point by reporting the results of a survey of assessment practices in 30 nursery schools in the Strathclyde Region of Scotland. The issue of assessment has become salient because the United Kingdom has been the site of recent debates on what constitutes a good quality program, and questions about assessment are related to concerns about program quality. In this context, a small scale survey was developed to assess practice in 30 nursery schools. Results of this survey include the following: (1) all schools had staff with teaching qualifications and nursery school qualifications working together, creating certain workplace tensions; (2) despite these tensions, there was implicit agreement among teachers that they must collaborate for the good of the students and their parents; (2) the majority of staff had some influence on policy decisions regarding assessment; (3) collaboration existed in some, but by no means all, assessment areas--different teaching staff assessed different aspects of learning and development; and (4) collaboration with parents is a key part of assessment. Contains 40 references. (JW)

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Anne Hughes
Centre for Early Education Studies
Department of Primary Education
University of Strathclyde

Parents, Professionals and Assessment: Attitudes and Roles in Assessment in Nursery Education

Summary

The description of appropriate curriculum and assessment policy and practice and the exploration of the roles of nursery teachers, nursery nurses and parents have been key elements in the current debate in the United Kingdom about the nature of quality educational experiences for children under five. This paper aims to contribute to the debate by: discussing the potential of assessment to act as an impetus to and focus for collaboration among staff from different professional backgrounds and between staff and parents; and to illustrate the realisation of this in practice by reporting on a survey of assessment practice in nursery schools and classes in Strathclyde Region.

Introduction

The description of appropriate curriculum and assessment policy and practice and the exploration of the roles of nursery teachers, nursery nurses and parents have been key elements in the current debate in the United Kingdom about the nature of quality educational experiences for children under five. This paper aims to contribute to the debate by: discussing the potential of assessment to act as an impetus to and focus for collaboration among staff from different professional backgrounds and between staff and parents; and by examining the roles of staff and parents described in a survey of assessment practice in nursery schools and classes in Strathclyde Region.

The role of assessment in education, including early education contexts, has been at the centre of educational debate in the United Kingdom since the introduction of curriculum and assessment legislation and guidelines (Education Reform Act, 1988, SOED Curriculum and Assessment Guidelines, 1990, 1991).

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It is claimed that assessment is central to the learning process (TGAT, 1988a, SOED,1991). The exclusion of pre-school education from the legislation and guidelines has not excluded pre-school educators from the debate nor from the need to examine policy and practice in assessment. Indeed worries over the top-down pressure of national curriculum legislation and guidelines and the debate over baseline assessment for school entrants has focused attention on the need to articulate curriculum and assessment models appropriate to the context of pre-school education.

The roles which nursery nurse, nursery teachers and parents play in the education of the under fives is currently the subject of debate and redefinition. Rumbold (1990) suggests that all workers in all settings must regard themselves as educators.

The significant role of parents in the learning of children under five has been demonstrated by Tizard and Hughes (1984) and Wells(1986) and there has been increased interest in the development of partnerships between parents and nursery staff (Pugh, 1989).

Close observation and assessment helps to build up the detailed knowledge of the child which is required in order to plan appropriate learning experiences and to scaffold children's learning (eg Lally, 1992).

Traditionally assessment has been associated with the educational role of teachers in nursery schools and classes (Clift et al,1981) . However, the benefits to children of all staff and parents building on each other's knowledge have been outlined by Athey (1990) and Wolfendale (1988). This involvement would appear to be crucial in informing all adults who are engaged in the education of children so that appropriate responses can be made to children.

The extent to which nursery nurse staff and parents have begun to share in curriculum and assessment, the core elements of teaching and learning, rather than in more peripheral aspects of provision may provide an indication of the extent of partnership or collaboration among staff and between staff and parents in the education of the under fives.

Issues of Quality

The current impetus for a clearer statement of what constitutes quality in services for the under fives, including the provision of quality curriculum and assessment, is in line with preoccupation throughout the world with quality systems.

In the United Kingdom, a number of factors have focused attention on the need to articulate what constitutes quality in services for the under fives.

In part it has been generated by the implications of policy decisions on education, indicated in the introduction to this paper. The curriculum and assessment requirements of the National Curriculum and the 5-14 Curriculum and Assessment guidelines in Scotland have highlighted the importance of assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning. Fears of top down pressures on services for the under fives to move to a more standardised, subject centred curriculum and to assessment based on attainment targets and testing have led to efforts being made to reiterate and clarify the principles and practice of early education (eg Bruce, 1987; David, 1992). However, Drummond (1989 a) suggests that in the past rhetoric has been a substitute for a reasoned philosophy of practice in early education and that urgent steps should be taken to develop and articulate a sound theory of education for young children.

Current thinking outlines a positive view of young learners, (eg Donaldson, 1978; Tizard and Hughes, 1984); Hughes, 1986) and emphasises the child as an active constructor of learning. Insights from Vygotsky, have led to increased interest in the role of social context and relationships in learning. The adults with whom the child interacts and the responses they make are vital in "scaffolding" the child's learning (Bruner, 1983; Wood, 1988; Rogoff, 1990). The implications of these insights have a major bearing on the development of quality in curriculum and pedagogy.

Research which points to the positive role of quality learning experiences in the early years of early as a basis for future learning (Osborn and Millbank, 1987) and life experiences (Beruetta-clement et al, 1984) also highlights the need for quality and defines some of the quality indicators.

The Children Act (1992) which imposes an obligation on local authorities to provide services for children in need, including children under five, also gives authorities

increased responsibilities for registering, inspecting and reviewing services. This has generated an urgent need for clearly defined criteria of quality.

The acknowledgement that there is little likelihood of substantial publicly administered funding to generate a more widespread or co-ordinated service for young children and their families, at a time when there is increasing demand, has led to the rapid development of private services for the under fives. Recent government decisions to provide vouchers to parents to fund part of the cost of services may fuel this development further. As services and providers become more diverse, there is increasing concern that guidance to parents and to providers on what constitutes basic standards of quality is required.

Issues of accountability, particularly the increasing emphasis on parental rights in education, generates a need for clearly stated aims and well-defined practice to enable parents and others to make judgements of the effectiveness of particular services.

The increased recognition of the important role of parents in educating their children before and during formal schooling (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Tizard et al, 1988; Athey 1990) has implications for role of parents in the development of quality services.

The negative effects of discontinuity on children's learning (Cleave et al 1982) and of inappropriate contexts for learning (NFER, 1987) have led to the reiteration of the need for continuity for young children and for the provision of a developmentally appropriate curriculum as prerequisites of quality.

A substantial body of literature exploring quality issues and attempting to establish quality frameworks has been produced: (eg Starting With Quality, HMSO 1990a, The Education of Children Under Five, DES 1989, The Children Act Guidance and Regulations Vol 2, DH 1991, Start Right, RSA 1994).

Quality in Practice

In examining principles and practice in services for the under fives assessment has been identified as a key process in developing and maintaining quality (Drummond and Nutbrown, 1992, p 90)

The Rumbold Committee suggested that all workers in all settings for the under fives must regard themselves as educators (HMSO, 1990a para 5) and should be involved in the planning and the development of the curriculum (para 76). The acceptance of this view is reflected in the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) system which identifies competences in curriculum planning and assessment as prerequisites for those seeking to work in the care and education of young children (NVQ standards C 16 and C19). However, this does not necessarily reflect current practice nor the training and roles of existing staff in nursery schools and classes. Indeed Clift et al (1981) suggested in the past the reality was somewhat different :

The picture which emerges is of two professions each with its own distinctive training and tradition, each with its beliefs about what it is aiming to do and what its specific responsibilities are, working side by side in the nursery. The assistants are deployed to maintain the environment, the teacher to administer it, planning its activities and in overall charge.

Heaslip's (1987) study of training reaffirmed this view.

Observing, assessing and recording are widely recognised as key elements in the curriculum planning cycle (eg DES, 1989, SOED, 1991). Moore and Sylva (1984) reported that nursery staff identified team planning and planning for the individual child as key reasons for assessing children and keeping records. However the traditional training of nursery nurses has given little emphasis to these aspects. Heaslip (1987) suggested that nursery nurses did not consider that these aspects should be significant in their training. Traditionally there has been little access to inservice training for nursery nurses.

This may have implications for the extent to which nursery nurses are currently involved in curriculum planning and assessment and for further development of such participation.

Lally (1992) suggests that both long-term and short-term planning are vital in providing effective learning experiences, particularly in providing for continuity and progression. Planning should be implemented in a flexible manner which relies on close observation of children's responses as a basis for staff interactions and for evaluation and future planning. This view fits well with traditional approaches to

pre-school education. For example, Isaacs (1960) pioneered the use of what she termed 'prospective assessment' which relied on observation techniques to identify actual cognitive competence so that teaching and curriculum content could be closely matched to current interests and attainment. The move away from notions of readiness and the recognition of the importance of social contexts for learning and the role of the adult in scaffolding children's learning. (eg Wood, 1988) have also re-emphasised the role of observation and assessment in the development of quality learning experiences.

Continuity and progression for the learner is important at all stages but particularly for the under fives as they may be less resilient to the effects of discontinuity (Cleave et al, 1982).

Rumbold stresses the role of assessment and record keeping in minimising discontinuity and actively promoting progression.

Providing quality care and education is dependent on staff developing detailed understanding of individual children in their care. The development of relationships and shared histories (Tizard and Hughes, 1984) and scripts or patterns of exchanges (Rogoff, 1990 ; Meadows and Cashdan, 1988) are vital for children's learning. An exchange of information between parents and staff would appear to be crucial in the development of detailed understanding of children and in the maintenance of continuity in experience and learning. Wolfendale (1987) and Athey (1990) reported on the benefits to children in situations where parents and staff did recognise and build on each other's contributions.

Drummond suggests that observing the learning and development of individual children will enable all staff to learn more about learning itself, thus developing their own understanding of the processes involved and enabling them to refine the curriculum. This type of approach informed the work of Isaacs, a pioneer of nursery education, (eg 1960) and was noted by Lomax (1979) as a key purpose given for the involvement of all staff in assessment in Dunbartonshire nursery schools in the 1970's.

Assessment has been identified as a proactive as well as a reactive process in curriculum planning, in providing for continuity and progression for children, in the professional development and training of staff and in liaison with parents.

A recurring theme, in the development of quality assessment procedures, is the need for collaboration among staff and between staff and parents.

The Situation in Strathclyde

In 1985 Strathclyde Regional council (SRC 1985) recognising the difficulties for parents and for children in the unco-ordinated range of services for the under fives and the need for a more integrated approach to the care and education of young children made the decision to vest all services for pre-school children within the education department.

The council advocated the development of a 'generic pre five worker' with knowledge and expertise in care and education. The key role of parents and the need for services to be actively engaged with parents were important principles of the new pre-five services.

At a time when value positions and policy decisions were being adopted with regards to parent and staff roles, it seemed particularly relevant to know what roles and attitudes were adopted by the adults concerned : parents, teachers and nursery nurses. This was the baseline from which the quality models of curriculum and assessment called for in numerous report would have to be developed.

Therefore a key aim of the research reported on in this paper was:

to explore the extent to which assessment practice
in nursery schools and classes was collaborative.

Strathclyde presented an interesting context for this research. The innovative decision to integrate all pre-five services within the education department of the regional council had raised the profile of pre-five services politically and educationally. Education and care had been given equal status and value positions about learning, staff roles and parent roles had been espoused by the policy makers. In particular the Under Fives Report (SRC 1985) suggested that:

... there will be a change required in the roles required of nursery teachers and nursery nurses through the development of a team approach

... nursery nurses would become involved in specific educational programmes
(para 7.21 - 7.26).

... The greatest resource in any community for the provision of services to pre-fives and parents is the parents themselves,
(par 8.14)

It was recommended that all nurseries prepared a scheme for parental involvement.

However, although commitment to staff development was high and the intention to provide guidance on curriculum and assessment was there, staff in establishments were grappling with the practicalities of developing team approaches in a situation presenting a number of difficulties.

There was tension about professional roles. Strathclyde's aim of developing community nurseries and the 'generic pre-five worker' became a bitter issue for teachers who attempted to maintain their own professionalism (Watt, 1990) by outlining specific educational responsibilities which teachers were trained to undertake. Curriculum planning and assessment were key elements. On the other hand, Penn (1992) comments on the huge injustice felt by nursery nurses in relation to their poor remuneration and career prospects and the devaluation of their work. Similar tensions had been reported in other areas of the United Kingdom. For example, Heaslip (1987) reported the difficulties for teachers in leading nursery teams in a context in which nursery nurses believed that teachers were unnecessary.

Even if these tensions did not affect the development of collaborative approaches at

establishment level, other practical difficulties remained. Government policy (HMSO, 1971, p48, HMSO, 1972, p48) had led to the development of a pattern of largely part-time attendance in nursery schools and classes. This resulted in nurseries in effect working with double the number of children. For example a nursery with full time places for fifty children would be staffed by a teacher and four nursery nurses; a ratio of 1:10. However, in effect over the day the nursery would accommodate one hundred children. This presented a large number of parents to be involved with.

Another factor was the duration of attendance. Again because of the demand for places most children who were able to access a nursery place would attend only for the pre-school year.

Elfer and Wedge, cited by Pugh, (1992, p67) warn that:

the translation of quality frameworks into practice ...
demands time ... this is because working with children is
primarily a matter of reflective and carefully managed
relationships which take time to develop.

The same statement could be applied equally to the need for time to develop relationships with parents and to facilitate staff/parent collaboration. Time and numbers presented practical constraints for the development of collaborative practice in assessment.

How would the value positions of involvement, collaboration and recognition of shared expertise espoused in the Under Fives report (SRC, 1985) be realised in practice in light of these tensions and constraints?

Collaboration in Practice?

A Survey Of Assessment Practice in 30 Nursery Schools and Classes

A small scale questionnaire survey was decided on to provide an overview of practice. This had advantages in that a substantial amount of data was acquired which illustrated the range and extent of assessment practice. However, it was limited in

the extent to which questions probing underlying assumptions or seeking clarification could be framed.

30 nursery schools and classes were selected in 2 divisions of Strathclyde which represented 25% of provision in these areas . A questionnaire was distributed to teachers as these were identified as the staff responsible for the development of policy and practice of assessment in the nursery schools and classes.

The results are therefore illustrative rather than generalisable

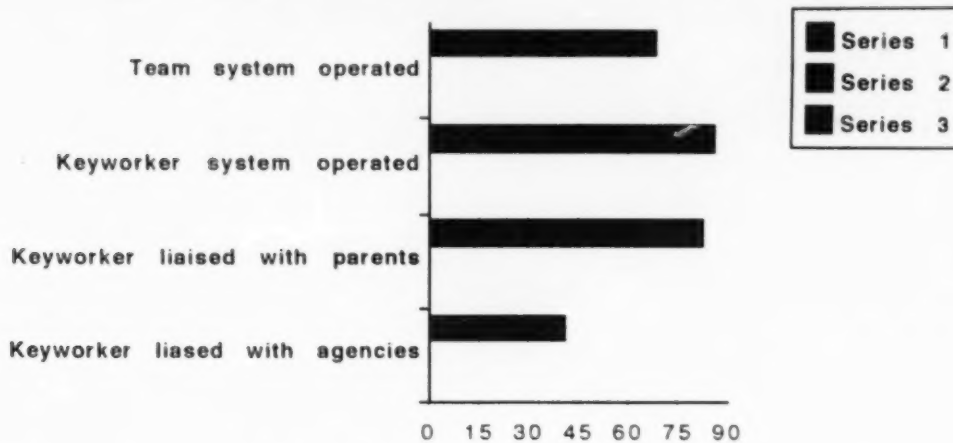
The questionnaire was in three sections: Section A sought background information about each nursery, in particular information on the deployment and roles of staff and facilities for and involvement of parents in the nursery; Section B gathered information about the practice of assessment in particular who was involved in gathering, recording and sharing assessment information; Section C sought evaluative information on respondents perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of collaboration in assessment among staff and between staff and parents.

Teachers and Nursery Nurses

As expected all of the nurseries had staff with teaching qualifications and nursery nurse qualification working alongside each other. As previously discussed, Rumbold (1990) suggested that the development of professional collaboration was vital in providing quality in services for the under fives. However, Clift et al (1980, p97) suggested that in practice differences in training led to differences in role deployment.

The tensions inherent in this situation were explored and confirmed by Heaslip (1987) and particular tensions between staff groups in Strathclyde were noted by Penn (1992), yet the findings of this survey (see Figure 1 below) would suggest that there were indications of a general move towards shared responsibilities and teamwork. There appeared to be widespread recognition by these teachers of the inherent team aspect of work in nurseries and that sharing of responsibility for work with children and liaison with parents was common.

Figure 1 Indicators of shared responsibility % response

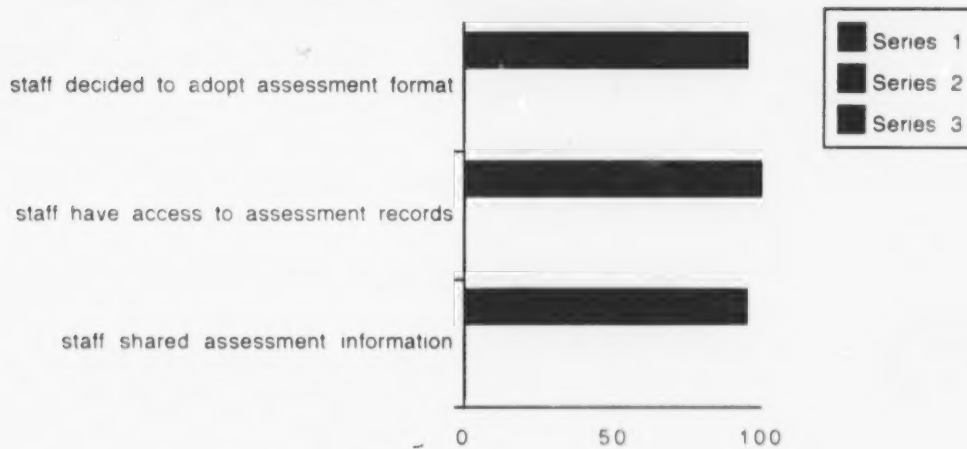


However, there were limits to the sharing. In only 41% of nurseries was this liaison role extended to cover work with other agencies.

Against this background of the operation of team systems and of nursery teachers and nursery nurses sharing responsibility for work with children and parents, it was interesting to explore the extent to which assessment, a core element of practice and traditionally wholly within the remit of the teacher, was an element of shared responsibility.

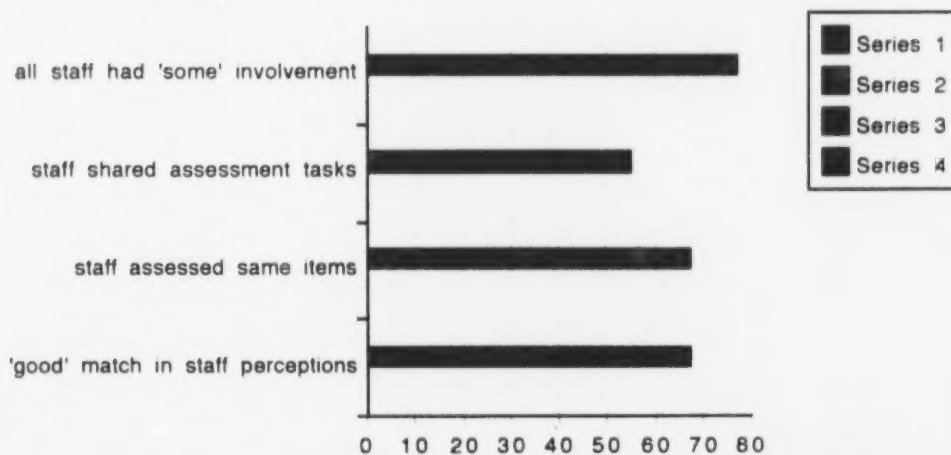
Figure 2A (below) illustrates that the vast majority of staff had some influence over policy with regards to assessment and had access to information about assessment. This corresponded well to the general levels of sharing outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 2A Indicators of staff sharing responsibility for assessment % response



When it came to implementing assessment in practice, the level of collaboration reduced. 77% had only 'some involvement' but 55% shared equally. This suggested that some measure of collaboration in assessment existed but this was by no means universal(see Figure 2B below). Differential role deployment still existed but in a minority of nurseries.

Figure 2B Indicators of staff sharing assessment in practice % response

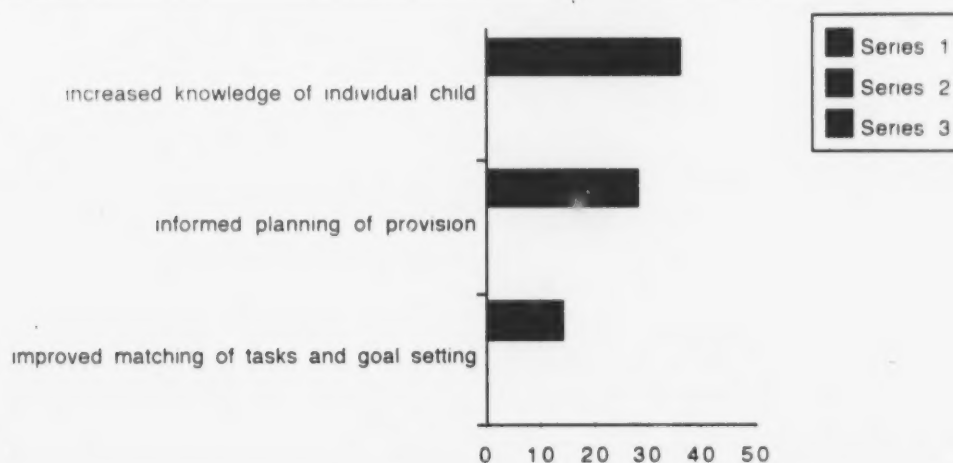


Where teaching staff and nursery nurse staff assessed different aspects of learning and development, the differential allocation of responsibility followed traditional

role assignation (Clift et al, 1980). Teachers generally assessed cognitive aspects or took overall responsibility and nursery nurses assessed physical and social and emotional development (Hughes, 1993).

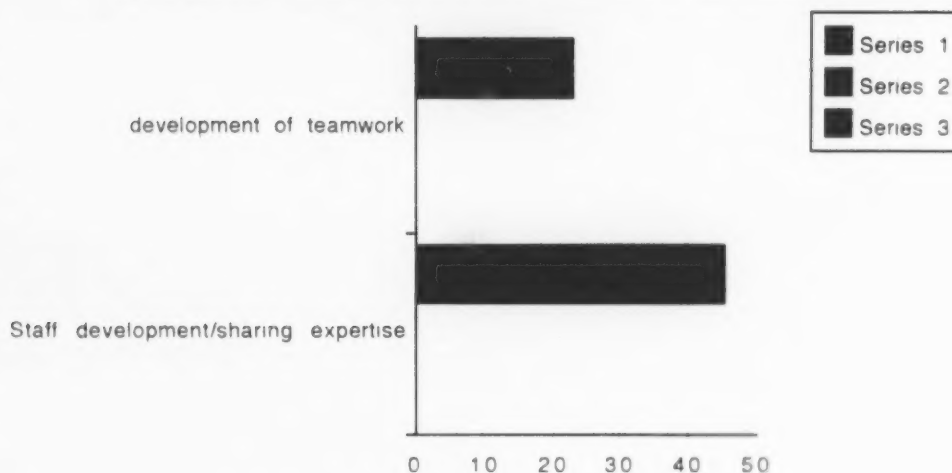
The perceived benefits (see Figure 3A below) to children corresponded closely to the views expressed in the literature that assessment is valuable for planning and matching experiences to children's learning (eg Moore and Sylva, 1984; Lally, 1992) and to the stated assessment purposes of these respondents (Hughes, 1993).

Figure 3A Benefits to children of staff sharing in assessment % frequency of response



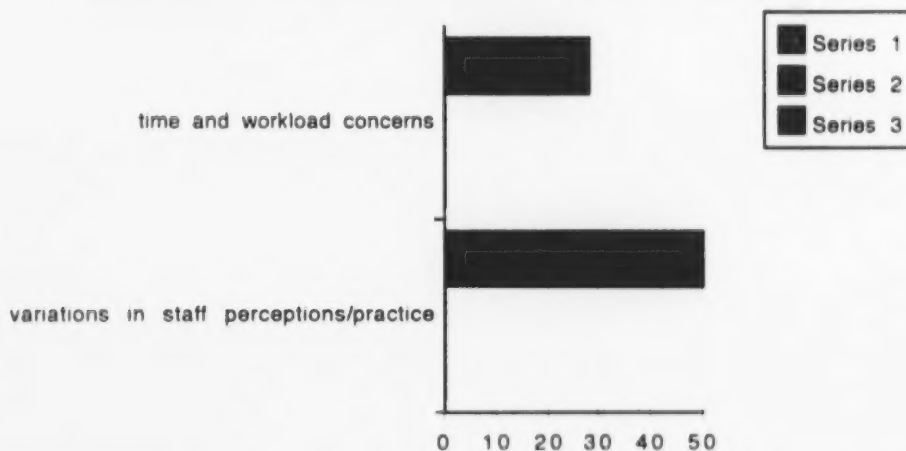
All respondents recognised that there were benefits, either potential or actual, to staff in sharing in assessment. The pattern of replies (see Figure 3B below) closely matched the findings of Lomax (1979) and corresponded to the influential writing of Isaacs (eg 1960).

Figure 3B Benefits to staff of sharing in assessment % response



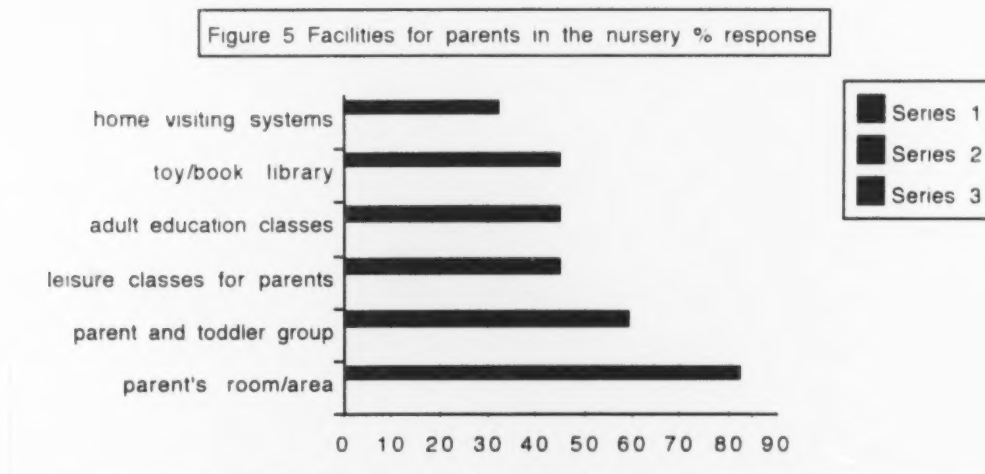
Although respondents reported the development of shared assessment practice and recognised benefits to children and to staff 50% of respondents were still concerned about differences in staff perceptions and practice and the differential training which contributed to this (Hughes, 1993). Time commitment and workload were factors which concerned 28% of respondents.

Figure 4 Disadvantages of staff sharing in assessment % response



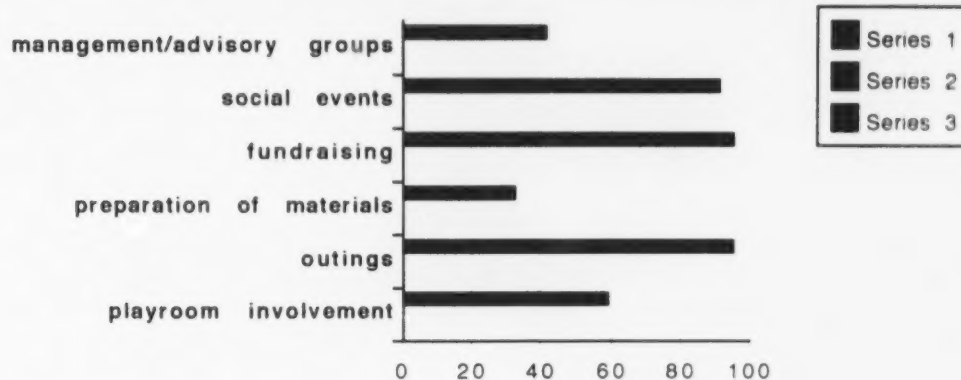
Staff and Parents

Background information from Section A of the questionnaire revealed that the vast majority of nurseries had facilities for parents covering a range of functions (see Figure 5 below).



This indicated the existence of forums in which communication between staff and parents might develop and in which confidence might be encouraged. Parents' own learning and social needs were recognised to some extent with adult education and leisure classes being provided by nurseries. These findings provided a measure or recognition among respondents that work in nurseries had wider responsibilities than those specifically directed at children attending the nursery and conformed to the recommendations of the Under Fives Report (SRC, 1985). Parents were also directly involved in the work of the nursery (see Figure 6 below). While most involvement focused on fund-raising and social events, there was some direct involvement of parents in educational experiences through their playroom involvement and preparation of materials. 59% of nurseries had regular playroom involvement of parents.

Figure 6 Type of parental involvement % response



This indicated some potential for the development of shared understanding of educational purpose and practice, identified by Wolfendale (1992) as a key feature of genuine collaboration with parents and that there was potential for parental collaboration in assessment. However this potential was not fully reflected in the actual practice of involving parents in assessment (see Figure(s) 7A, &7b below).

Figure 7A indicates the levels of involvement of parents in assessment policy and their access to assessment information. Figure 7B illustrates the actual engagement of parents with in the implementation of assessment.

Parents were well informed of the assessments carried out which corresponded well to the stated assessment purposes of these respondents but was in contrast to the earlier findings of Moore and Sylva (1984). This may be related to general moves to providing more information to parents nationally or a response to the high profile given to parents in the Under Fives report (SRC, 1985). However despite higher levels of involvement in playroom activities, and the existence of advisory groups, fewer than one third of parents had any involvement in policy decisions related to assessment.

There were few indications that collaborative assessment which recognised the equal expertise of parents had developed in the majority of nurseries. It would appear that although most nurseries were superficially involved with parents, fewer than one quarter had taken up the challenge of active engagement with parents in the central concerns of assessment.

Figure 7 Indicators of parents and staff sharing responsibility for assessment % response

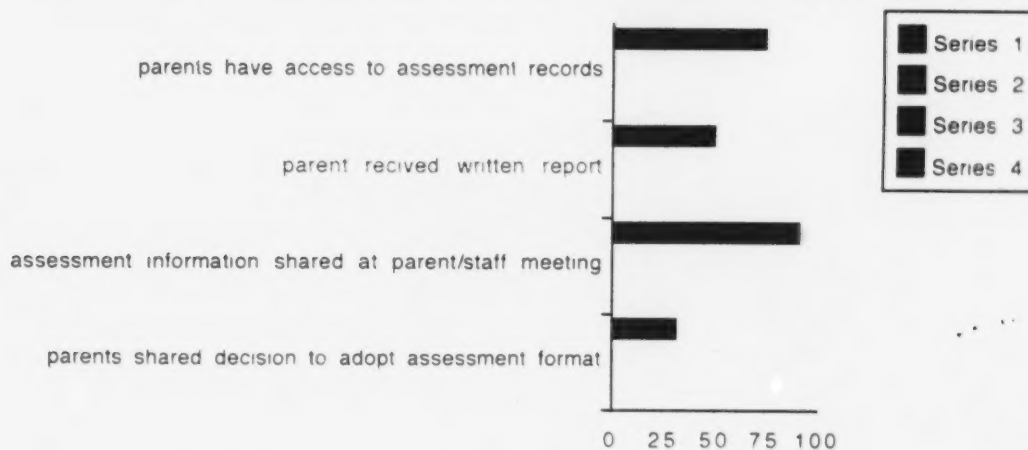
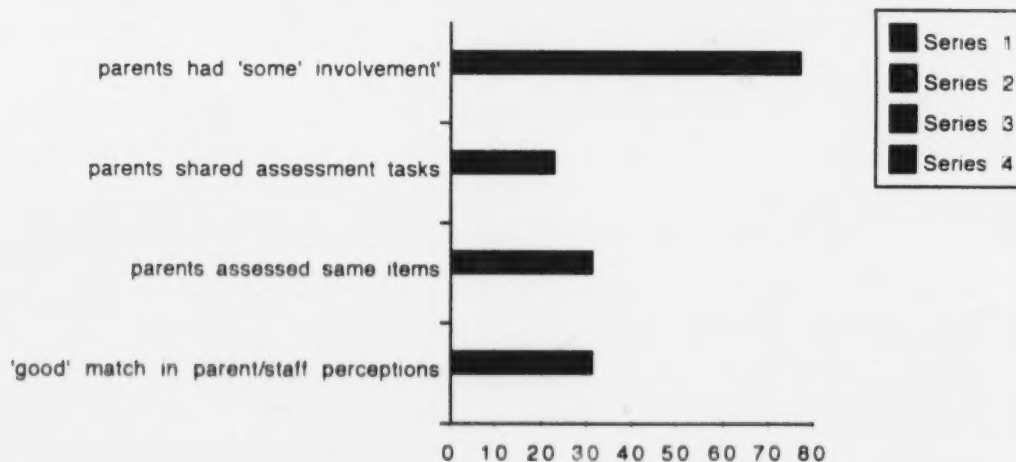


Figure 7 B Indicators of staff/parents sharing assessment in practice 5 response



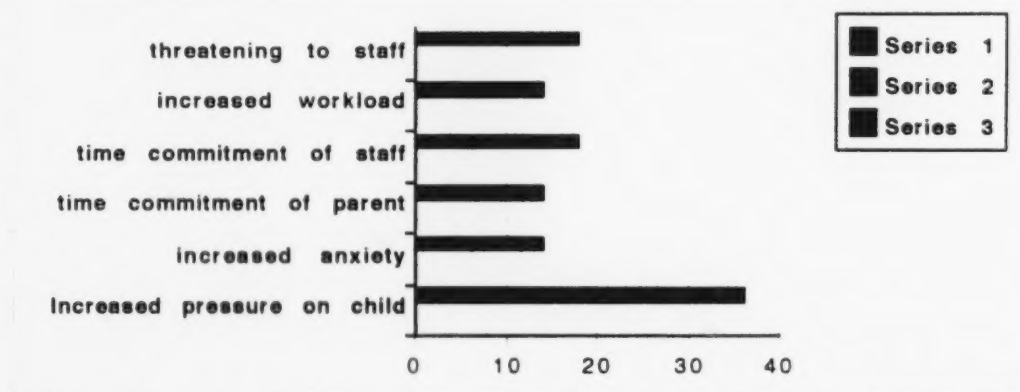
A large number and variety of benefits of shared assessment for children, parents and staff were recognised. These corresponded to the benefits of collaboration

highlighted in the literature (eg Wolfendale 1992,). However, despite beliefs in the potential benefits of parental involvement in assessment practical means of achieving this had not been developed in the majority of nurseries. This corresponded to the findings of Watt (1977 p2) who concluded that:

co-operation in its many ramifications is largely approved in principle but neglected in practice.

This may be related to the disadvantages of collaborating with parents which were identified by respondents. More than a third of respondents were concerned that such involvement would bring about increased pressure on the child. This and perceptions that it would increase anxiety for parents and be threatening to staff indicated an unease about the direct involvement of parents with staff in assessment practice.

Figure 8 Disadvantages of parents sharing in assessment % response



Conclusions

Assessment presents an ideal focus for inter-professional and parent/professional collaboration and such collaboration benefits the development and implementation of assessment practice. It opens up the curriculum, approaches to learning and the day to day organisation of the nursery for discussion, scrutiny and clarification. It affords children opportunities to demonstrate their learning in a variety of contexts. It provides forums in which the learning and achievements of individual children can

be assessed more accurately and future learning planned for; in which assessment assumptions can be made explicit; in which staff can develop their expertise and confidence in assessment; and in which parents can be empowered by increased understanding of the educational process and by the recognition by staff of parents expert knowledge of their own children. Ultimately this understanding should benefit the learning of children. However these benefits cannot be fully realised without shifts in attitudes and roles by both teachers and nursery nurses.

While the results of this survey cannot be generalised to other contexts it would appear that in the nurseries surveyed there had been a shift in roles and that nursery nurses had begun to assume some of the core aspects of the role of educator.

Despite continued tensions and concerns over differences in training and perceptions which require further examination, the majority of respondents suggested that inter-professional collaboration in assessment was being developed. There were indications that assessments were discussed formally within establishments and were related to planning for individuals and groups. The benefits to parents and staff were recognised and disadvantages were perceived to be minimal and related to practical constraints rather than professional values.

Collaboration with parents in the core area of assessment, although recognised to have potential benefits, was not well developed in the majority of nurseries. The need to protect children from 'pressure' from parents, parents from anxiety and staff from threats to their professionalism was indicative of the barriers which exist in all spheres of education as staff seek to maintain the role of expert and fail to fully recognise the justifiable interest and expertise of parents. Therefore, many of the potential benefits of parent/professional assessment; the promotion of learning, the empowerment of parents and the development of staff expertise, were not being realised in these nurseries.

However, a small core of 5 nurseries suggested that both inter-professional and parent/professional collaboration was well developed. This requires further investigation, but if substantiated could provide those local examples of practice which seem vital in moving practice forward.

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